

Don't ban no-platforming

Sizwe Mpfu-Walsh argues that no-platforming is an expressive act that can expand the field of debate, rather than the denial of free speech.



At first, “no-platforming” seems at odds with free speech but, on closer view, the story is not so simple. The primary misunderstanding stems from a superficial conception of free speech. Denying someone an influential platform is no more an infringement of their freedom of speech than denying someone a Ferrari is an infringement of their freedom of movement. What we are dealing with in this debate is a special category of prioritised, privileged and unencumbered speech; not so much speech as the means of its magnification. From the outset, then, we should not confuse “no-platforming” with “no-speaking”.

No-platforming is both an act and a policy. As an act, it involves disrupting, significantly reducing, or wholly preventing the magnification of speech. For instance, a certain group might successfully

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protest against an institution providing someone with a platform. As a policy, no-platforming involves institutional refusal to magnify certain speech. For example, an anti-racism society might choose not to platform a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

No one argues that no-platforming is always appropriate. In fact, we can even concede that no-platforming is inappropriate in most cases. Indeed, no-platforming should be used as a last resort, and only against serious injustice. However, this does not undermine the idea itself. The fact that no-platforming can be abused is irrelevant, since the question of principle is whether it should ever be applied. Slippery slope arguments will not do, since the slope can slide either way, in principle.

A second key misunderstanding stems from conflating speech and illocution. By calling for a total ban on no-platforming, its opponents actually shrink the horizon of debate. Speech and indeed expression are much deeper than mere talking. The ability to communicate ideas through symbols, or to construct an agenda before a word is spoken, can be powerful acts of expression in themselves. Combating ideas at the agenda-setting level, rather than the illocutionary level, may well produce more productive debate in the long-run.

It may be the case, for instance, that no-platforming fosters a necessary higher-order debate on what speech is acceptable in a given society. Take the current controversy over a statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford. The Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign has been mistakenly accused of limiting expression. In fact, RMF has [sparked one of the most important debates](#) about racial inequality in Oxford's history. If the campaign was dissuaded by a crude free speech critique, Oxford would have got both less speech and – in my view – also been deprived the opportunity of enlarging justice.

Of course, some blame lies on the side of no-platforming's adherents, who have too readily ceded ground on free speech. It is not enough to frame the debate solely from the perspective of a "clash of competing values" because free speech often reinforces – instead of detracts from – those other values. No-platforming can actually create symbiotic relationships between democracy, justice and speech when done right. By banning no-platforming altogether, we, ironically, exclude any chance of this happening.

Further confusion emerges from blurring epistemic humility with free speech. The fact that we do not know everything does not mean that we know nothing. Racism, antisemitism, or the victimisation of persons with disabilities, is something we all know is wrong, with a high degree of confidence. Too often, opponents of no-platform assume that all issues are equally doubtful. Further, to argue that we may benefit from some unforeseen piece of wisdom by listening to a racist applies equally to no-platforming itself: who is to say that we will not benefit from some unforeseen gem through an act of expressive protest? Opponents of no-platforming cannot hold a monopoly on luck, or claim superior clairvoyance.

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As with all complex moral questions, the legitimacy of no-platforming is deeply contingent on circumstance. For example, the reach of the platform matters: an audience of three is different to primetime news. The person being no-platformed also matters. In many cases, their views may already enjoy significant dissemination. The social vulnerability of those likely to be affected by the speech is also a factor. The same phrase addressed to a rich, heterosexual, “white” adult may have drastically different social implications when addressed to a disabled Muslim child, for instance.

Enthusiastic opponents of no-platforming often issue warnings of crypto-totalitarianism. This is deeply unfair, and also plain wrong. We cannot equate the disagreement with a single individual's view, at a single time, in a single place, with a state-wide strategy of mass censorship. Individual freedom requires the ability to discern, and disagree. No-platforming simply takes the question a step further by allowing people the liberty to act on their convictions in extreme circumstances.

By challenging the binary opposition between no-platforming and free speech, we can free ourselves from the dogmatic aspects of each position. It seems strange that students are painted as the chief threat to individual liberty, when media conglomerates control discourse ever more tightly and governments the world over roll back crucial rights in the name of security. Perhaps it is time for both sides of this debate to realise that they are arguing about the same principle from different perspectives. The heart of the debate is really about the political economy of speech, not speech's importance itself.

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